

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

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Contact:

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The U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom wrote to President Clinton September 6 urging that he raise with India's Prime Minister A.B. Vajpayee "the need for his government to take more effective steps to protect religious freedom and the lives and security of persons of religious minorities in India." President Clinton will meet with the Prime Minister in Washington on September 15. The Commission is concerned by an increase in assaults on religious minorities by self-proclaimed Hindu nationalists since Mr. Vajpayee's Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) came to power. The Commission recommends that the President "impress on the Prime Minister that promotion of religious freedom is indispensable to healthy relations between India and the United States." The text of the letter follows:

September 6, 2000

The Honorable William J. Clinton
President of the United States of America
The White House
Washington, DC 20500

Re: Meeting With India's Prime Minister Vajpayee, September 15, 2000

Dear Mr. President:

On behalf of the U.S. Commission On International Religious Freedom, I urge you to impress upon India's Prime Minister A.B. Vajpayee during your meetings on September 15, the need for

his government to take more effective steps to protect religious freedom and the lives and security of persons of religious minorities in India.

Since the rise to national power of Mr. Vajpayee's Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) in 1998, assaults on religious minorities by self-proclaimed Hindu nationalists have substantially increased in a number of Indian states. Christian converts have been intimidated, churches and schools have been burned, nuns raped, missionaries and priests murdered. Muslims continue to be the targets of vandalism and assault, sometimes under the pretext that they are advocates for Kashmiri separatism or agents of Pakistan. The inaction of local authorities strongly suggests complicity. And Mr. Vajpayee's national government has understated and failed to effectively respond to the violence.

All this has apparently convinced the Sangh Parivar, the collective name for India's grass roots nationalist Hindu organizations closely allied to the BJP, that it can foment antagonism and discrimination against non-Hindus with impunity, even when violence ensues.

The Commission respectfully recommends that you impress on the Prime Minister that promotion of religious freedom is indispensable to healthy relations between India and the United States. The BJP should rebuke the intolerant rhetoric of the Sangh Parivar, legally challenge implementation of the state anti-conversion laws, and vigorously investigate and prosecute those responsible for the wave of violence against religious minorities.

We hope that you use this opportunity to engage the Prime Minister in serious discussions of religious freedom and communal violence in India.

Respectfully,

Elliott Abrams

Chairman

The U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom was created by the International Religious Freedom Act of 1998 to monitor the status of freedom of thought, conscience, and religion or belief abroad, as defined in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and related international instruments, and to give independent policy recommendations to the President, the Secretary of State and the Congress.

- Hon. Elliott Abrams
- Dr. Firuz Kazemzadeh